

Spotlight on Teaching: George Ozuna

Filmmaker inspires San Antonio students

By Autumn Rhea Carpenter
Special to Texas Teacher

George Ozuna knows first-hand how it sometimes takes a bit of inspiration and guidance to strike out in pursuit of your own dreams, instead of the path envisioned by others.

“When I attended Harlandale High School in San Antonio, the career counselor knew many of my family members were mechanics,” Ozuna said. “And although I was interested in studying film at the University of Texas at Austin or University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), he said to me: ‘You people are good with your hands. You should consider a career in carpentry.’ Obviously this man had not seen my handiwork, or he would have never made such an assumption. His comment only spurred my desire to study film.”

Ozuna worked toward a different vision, and now he is director of production at the Film School of San Antonio at Harlandale High School. There he continues to offer support to students who show a love for film but often are stuck in a mindset where obtaining a viable career in filmmaking is farfetched.

Ozuna, 50, a University of Texas at Austin (UT) graduate, certified in film production from New York University (NYU), and influenced by the works of Robert

De Niro and Martin Scorsese, knew early that he would become a teacher. The filmmaker has created over 40 documentaries, shorts, and features throughout his career, always enjoyed working with youth, and returned to San Antonio to make the most impact. In 2004, he approached Harlandale High School’s superintendent with an innovative idea.

Armed with a letter from Congressman Ciro Rodriguez—also a Harlandale High School graduate—Ozuna pitched the idea of initiating a magnet film production program on the school’s campus.



Ozuna’s students hear from Sundance Film Festival Creator Robert Redford.

“I explained how this program could help shift the trajectory of the poverty cycle,” he said. “The superintendent agreed, and the Film School of San Antonio was born.”

Four years after its inception, the Film School of San Antonio now includes five instructors and 238 students. Freshmen through seniors can learn filmmaking, animation, screenwriting, acting, and marketing for media. “Each year students must re-apply for the program and explain why they should be accepted,” Ozuna said.

The school’s students are primarily Hispanic, and some 75 percent have special needs. Collectively, they produce between 30 and 40 films each year. During the Film School of



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San Antonio’s first year, students received an Emmy for the film “La Corrida” (The Run), which portrayed immigrants’ struggles to get across the border.

“The students had asked their families about personal issues,” Ozuna recalled. “Many people described their nightmares of being raped, robbed, and murdered while immigrating from Mexico into Texas. It was a rare chance for their families to tell their stories.”

With smaller, high-definition equipment and the evolution of digital editing software, film production capabilities have drastically changed. “In ‘La Corrida’ we used the Frio River, instead of the Rio Grande,” said Ozuna. “During the editing phase, we altered the river’s color and flow, and also added a big tree. In the big picture, technology offers much more diversity of vision.”

Daniel Garcia, a Film School of San Antonio graduate, had never finished a book before joining the program. He had intended to join his

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father’s DJ business, spinning records at parties. Now the University of Texas at Austin freshman is devouring the works of Russian authors. “He was the head writer for the Emerging Media Emmy© film award winner ‘La Mochal,’” Ozuna noted. “Daniel’s mother always thanks me for changing her son’s life. Daniel changed his own life. I simply served as a support system.” The educator claims building rigor and relevance is key in developing a student’s abilities. “I explain that we are all on a journey,” he said. “I just happen to be farther along the path and might have some life experience to share. We empower our students to be successful, critical-thinking, lifelong learners.”

In January, Ozuna broadened the horizons of 24 students by taking them to Park City, Utah, for the Sundance Film Festival. “One student only had flown on an airplane once, and another had seen snow once in Dallas,” he said. “So in addition to the flight and snow excitement, we were invited to meet directors, actors, and producers, and we were offered access to restricted areas to talk to people that literally have changed the world.

Ozuna, left in Park City, Utah, home of the Sundance Film Festival.

At right, Ozuna’s students—(from left) Nephtali Valdez, Paul Ramos and Alejandra Lopez—listen to a directors’ panel at Sundance.

I was proud of the group’s professional demeanor and enthusiasm.”

A 26-year member of Texas AFT, Ozuna is a staunch union supporter. “I thank God for Texas AFT,” he said. “AFT has given me the confidence to deal with kids in tough situations, knowing that the union has my back. I can exert my energies on teaching, rather than on my personal finances, and that is such a relief in today’s teaching climate. AFT provides me with the peace of mind to teach, and I never have to look over my shoulder.”

Texas AFT candidate nominated for TRS Board

Texas AFT’s candidate was one of the top three vote-getters out of more than a dozen contenders in the employee election to fill a seat on the Teacher Retirement System board.

Texas AFT member Mary Johnson Richeson, a 32-year teaching veteran, is a member of the San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel, Texas AFT’s affiliate in San Antonio ISD.

Thanks to a vigorous grass-roots campaign spearheaded by union leaders and activists statewide, Richeson is now just one step away from

bringing Texas AFT’s movement for change to the TRS board.

The final vote tally was officially certified on May 23. At press time, it was still up to the governor to pick one of the top three vote-getters for a six-year employee slot on the board. Texas AFT’s longer-term goal is to change this system so that employees can directly elect employee representatives to oversee their pension fund—as state employees already can for their pension fund. Meanwhile, though, public school employees have to live with the existing TRS rules.